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ARGUMENT

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Kashmir Is a Dress Rehearsal for Hindu Nationalist Fantasies

Economic excuses are cover for the goal of transforming India into a so-called Hindu nation.

By Dibyesh Anand



An Indian soldier questions a man on a street during a curfew in Srinagar on August 8, 2019. TAUSEEF MUSTAFA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

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Activists chanted in the center of Ranchi, the capital of the eastern Indian state of Jharkhand and my parental city: “*Kashmir azaad ho gaya aaj*” (“Kashmir has been freed today”). The activists were celebrating the deathblow to Jammu and Kashmir’s autonomy struck by India’s ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on Aug. 5. They were not the only ones; much of the Indian public shared their vulgar joy.

It’s not the assimilation of Kashmir—whose autonomy in practice has long disappeared, diluted over the decades by military and bureaucratic means from the center—that brings this excitement. It’s not even the thought of giving the finger to India’s old archenemy, Pakistan, for daring to court U.S. President Donald Trump over Kashmir. The joy stems from the humiliation of Kashmir’s Muslims for daring to be different and the thought that this is a warning signal to all of India’s Muslims that the Hindu body politic is resurgent and unstoppable.

This is about empowering activists who now exclaim proudly, “*Aab Hindu Rashtra banega*” (“We will now build a Hindu nation”), or the ordinary vegetable vendor in Ranchi saying to me with sadistic glee: “Now the Muslims will become Hindu out of fear or they will go to Pakistan or they will face...” He let the sentence trail off, an unspoken threat.

The BJP, under strongman leader Narendra Modi, is driven by a far-right Hindu chauvinist ideology. Its solid reelection victory this spring gave it the power to bring about controversial and fundamental changes in Indian politics and justify them as a matter of national security and as a rectification of the “past mistakes” of the secularist Indian National Congress. The BJP has justified abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which guaranteed autonomy to Jammu and Kashmir, and of Article 35A, which protected indigenous society from possible demographic transformation in the name of development, equality, and national unity.

While analysts may try to connect Modi’s decision to geopolitical imbroglios, it is most appropriate to see it as a dress rehearsal for the BJP’s main agenda—the conversion of India from a secular pluralist democracy to a Hindu Rashtra. From political sloganeering “*Hindustan mein rehna hai to hindu ban kar rehna hoga*” (If you want to live in India, you have to be a Hindu) to the crackdown on religious

conversions into Islam and Christianity to inclusion of various anti-Muslim agendas in party manifesto to celebrating anti-secular supremacists as national heroes, the BJP is remaining true to the explicit agenda of Sangh Parivar, a family of organizations linked to the far-right paramilitary Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh.

The Hindu nationalism that fuels the BJP portrays Hindus—who make up 80 percent of the population—as involved in a long-term battle against numerous enemies: Muslims, Christians, communists, and secularists. Modi is imagined as a conquering leader who will overcome these foes, avenge humiliations suffered by the supposed Hindu nation over centuries, and rebuild a strong Hindu India where the threat of communism is extinguished; religious minorities are domesticated, expelled, or exterminated; and pluralist secularism is rejected as “minority-appeasing pseudo-secularism” while the acceptance of Hindu supremacy in India is seen as real secularism.

Kashmir has long played a critical part in this mythology. More than a decade ago, while doing research for my book *Hindu Nationalism in India and the Politics of Fear*, I met several leaders and activists from the Sangh Parivar, the umbrella of paramilitary groups around the BJP, who argued that Kashmir had to be the next battleground against Muslims. Just as the BJP’s cause had received a boost from the destruction of the historic Babri Mosque in 1992 in Ayodhya, they saw Kashmir as the next holy cause that would empower the nation. Today, they have Modi as prime minister and a strong majority for the BJP in India’s central government as well as several states. Experiments during the previous administration—including demonetization, lynching in the name of cow protection, and new exclusionary citizenships—showed the Indian public’s sadomasochistic fascination for drastic action and even violence so long as the primary victims were minorities; the time was ripe for the implementation of a Hinduization plan for Jammu and Kashmir.

Of course, this isn’t the reason the BJP gives. Home Minister Amit Shah insists that the corruption and economic backwardness of Jammu and Kashmir were a result of autonomous statehood rather than due to heavy militarization, state violence, and insurgency. That’s a specious argument, given the long-term economic damage done to the region by the cutoff of historical ties to its neighbors, including Pakistan and

Tibet. India has deliberately kept Kashmir dependent on New Delhi. The easy way to help the region develop would be to ease restrictions on cross-border trade and loosen security—but New Delhi does the exact opposite, imposing a colonial model of development in which outside capital will join the military and bureaucracy in imposing control. And as much as Shah and Modi speak the language of development, the reality is nationalist oppression.

The brutal swiftness of the move has shown that through the use of a narrative of national security, the BJP can break opposition parties and secure overwhelming parliamentary support, spur its grassroots workers, and keep the jingoist media on board. The widespread support for this act of constitutional vandalism shows that there is little hope of checking the BJP on other divisive domestic issues, such as the building of a grand temple to the Hindu god Ram on the site of the former Babri Mosque and taking away the existing rights of religious minorities to be governed by distinct personal laws on family matters including marriage and inheritance.

The biggest losers in this move are the pro-India Kashmiris who were denounced as collaborators for trusting India by their fellow Kashmiris, most of whom seek independence or to join with Pakistan. Their trust in India's secular democracy that provided special status and autonomy has been betrayed not only by the nationalist ruling party but by several opposition parties that are supposedly more progressive. The move has converted Kashmir into a battlefield with no middle ground of autonomy. Freedom within India is no longer an option, thanks to the Modi government. The Kashmir Valley will now face demographic transformation and settler colonialism. If Kashmiri Muslims resist, they will be the targets of yet more brutal state violence and be represented as Islamist terrorists; if they do not resist, their silence will be interpreted as support for India.

If Pakistan decides to once again train and arm Kashmiri militants and allow foreign militants into Kashmir, it may face isolation on the international stage. If it keeps quiet, it loses credibility among Kashmiris. Yet Pakistan has one option that will provide it with the moral and political high ground. Currently, in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, Kashmiri nationalists are not allowed to contest elections, and politicians have to resolve to support accession of the entire region to Pakistan. If

Prime Minister Imran Khan encourages a change in this stance and allows the people of Pakistan-administered Kashmir the freedom to choose either Pakistan or independence from both India and Pakistan, it will energize the Kashmiri movement and leave India on the back foot. This may do little to alleviate the damage done in India-administered Kashmir. But it will provide hope to the valley that would otherwise be smothered under the Hindu nationalist fantasies of today's India.

In India, the only hope is a concerted fight by progressives, secularists, minorities, and all the others who share a belief in the sanctity of constitutional democracy over nationalism. Otherwise the march of the Modi-led “one leader, one party, one nation” ideology toward a Hindu nation is a real threat.

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